

Review: Xoom emerges as first real iPad competitor

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In this Feb. 2, 2011 file photo, a Motorola Xoom tablet is shown at Google headquarters in Mountain View, Calif. (AP Photo/Paul Sakuma, File)

Motorola's Xoom has been hailed as the most likely tablet computer to rival Apple's iPad - the first with the goods to compete against the uncontested leader in this nascent but rapidly growing market.

After trying it out, I found it to be a great gadget that, in many ways, can keep up with the black slab from Apple. The first black slab, that is. Unfortunately, Apple said Wednesday that it will start selling a new,

improved iPad next week, which will likely make it difficult for the [Xoom](#) to snag many users.

The Xoom is well-equipped, with a large, vivid touch screen and zippy processor.

It's the first to use Honeycomb, Google Inc.'s flashy tablet-geared Android 3.0 software, which is a big improvement over older versions designed for phones but pushed onto some tablets.

It's clear the software was designed for a tablet's larger touch screen. A persistent bar at the bottom of the screen displays virtual "home" and "back" buttons. You get information such as battery life and wireless reception and notifications for e-mails, instant messages and more. You also get a virtual button that can pull up miniaturized images of your most recently used apps, the way it looked when you last used them. That makes it convenient for speeding back over to a game or Web page.

The touch-screen keyboard is also nicer, thanks to Honeycomb. It's easier to type e-mails and instant messages on the Xoom than on tablets running older versions of Android. Although it doesn't seem as easy to use as the iPad's [virtual keyboard](#), the Xoom's keyboard is fairly spacious and was something I got use to typing with after several hours. Those who do a lot of typing can use a Bluetooth keyboard or connect a USB keyboard with an adapter through the Xoom's Micro USB port.

There's one big blemish marring the Xoom's otherwise delightful package: its price tag.

The Xoom, made by Motorola Mobility Inc. and available from [Verizon Wireless](#), costs \$800 without a cellular-service contract, about \$70 more than a similarly apportioned iPad. You can get a Xoom for \$600, but you'll have to sign up for a two-year data plan that runs at least \$20 per

month; by contrast, AT&T Inc. offers month-to-month data service for the iPad. Like the iPad, the Xoom lets you access the Internet through Wi-Fi, so a data plan isn't essential.

While Motorola offers the Xoom in only one configuration right now - with 32 gigabytes of storage and data access through both Wi-Fi and Verizon's cellular network - Apple offers a range of iPads. The cheapest is \$499 and comes with 16 gigabytes of built-in storage and Wi-Fi access. The most expensive is \$829 for a 64-gigabyte version with Wi-Fi and the ability to access AT&T's data network for an additional fee.

Apple's iPad 2, which will be available in black and white, will keep the same pricing structure, and a version of it will work with Verizon's network.

Other than price, the Xoom and the iPad appear pretty similar: Both are thin, shiny slabs, though the Xoom's screen is a bit bigger (and the new iPad is noticeably thinner). The Xoom, like the iPad, has very few buttons: Volume buttons sit on one side, and a combined power and lock button is inconveniently positioned on the back.

The Xoom also has some 3-D-esque views incorporated throughout Xoom's software. Play music on the Xoom and you'll notice your albums are viewable in a 3-D-like array, or open up the included YouTube app and you'll see a curved gallery of videos.

I was happy to see an updated Web browser, which gives you the ability to open multiple tabs on a single screen; the iPad can't do that and instead forces you to open a new window for each Web page. Web surfing becomes easier and more clearly organized because you can see what you're doing all on one screen, without having to leave the webpage you're looking at. The browser also lets you surf the Web in "incognito mode," which means pages you visit won't be logged in the tablet's

browsing or search history; that's a feature common on desktop browsers.

Sadly, the Xoom didn't come with support for Flash videos, which is a popular online video format. An upgrade to allow that is coming soon.

The Xoom's screen measures 10.1 inches diagonally, compared with the iPad's 9.7 inches. Its resolution is slightly higher than the iPad's, and videos and photos looked bright and sharp with vivid colors. It's great for reading books downloaded through the included Google Books app. The app looks similar to one for Apple Inc.'s iBooks, but it also has "day" and "night" settings. Those let you switch to a white-text-on-black-background view when reading in the dark.

The Xoom includes a 5-megapixel camera on the back and a 2-megapixel camera on the front - cameras were lacking on the first iPad, but the iPad 2 will also have front and rear cameras. The Xoom's back camera includes some simple color effects and scene modes for adjusting your images. The front camera works with [Google](#) Talk's video chat feature, so you can conduct video chats with friends. This is a nice addition I'd been waiting to see.

I hoped there would be more tablet-specific apps available through Google's Android Market, but I only counted a handful, including a CNN application and the "Fruit Ninja" game. Several existing apps looked good on the Xoom's larger screen, however, including the game "Angry Birds."

These features are backed up by a dual-core processor, which make the Xoom zip along. The Xoom's 1 gigabyte of random-access memory - the kind important for running programs - is much more than the iPad has. In my tests, the tablet rarely faltered and was quick to load content offline.

Online, it was fairly speedy and reliable, and this is expected to improve. Currently, the Xoom uses Wi-Fi or Verizon's existing 3G data network for wireless service. Eventually, it will be upgraded to work on Verizon's faster 4G network.

The battery is rated for up to about 10 hours of video playback, or about nine hours of Web browsing over 3G; I played YouTube videos over Verizon's network and got more than six hours of life out of the Xoom. Not bad, but it could be better.

Regardless, the Xoom is a strong tablet, and the first true competitor to the iPad thus far. The new [iPad](#) looks enticing, but if you're set on getting a non-Apple tablet and can get past the Xoom's steep price, it's a good pick.

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